

SNAPSHOTS  
Jim Leftwich

## The Origins of Lineage in the Prescience of Context

As if predecessors, precursors, context, a lineage might somehow make sense of an individual at his desk, thinking, writing, choosing this and refusing that. Writing is subjectivity choosing, leaving a record in words of this choosing. Everything else anyone chooses to say about any writing is ancillary and extraneous. The last six months or so, along with the poetry and prose I am always writing, I have been writing essays. In a sense, all of them are essays on poetics. They began as a response to Bill Lavender's request for a statement of poetics for his anthology of the new southern writing. I wrote "Give Up" and "Another Failed Attempt to Photograph Reality" as statements of poetics. I didn't send either for the anthology. No one we can name has ever been the first to propose a position of anti-art both practically and philosophically as an apology for the production of art objects. The position of anti-art will have been the original position of the artist, since devolved to such mutant productions as the statement of poetics. It was inevitable, I suppose, that in the sort of nomadic reading I practice I would encounter at some point after the fact certain essays that seem to be precursors of my own. Talking with Ken Harris one night, I proposed Antin's talk poems as possible distant models for my recent practice. There is substance in this speculation, though slight, but I won't press it, if for no other reason than that I don't want Antin's performances as links in a lineage for these writings. Antin's talks are poems; my recent writings are essays. I think I suggested this to Ken because I wanted to have been thinking of something, someone, when I began these little essays, but the truth is I was thinking of no one. So, no lineage worth noting as an immediate element involved in the activity of these writings. We construct one after the fact only because this is an integral aspect of currently acceptable reading practice. A week or so ago I was looking through the Cage anthology edited by Kostelanetz and I came to Cage's essay on film. I have read most of this collection over the years, but somehow I missed the essay on film. It is an excellent example of a precursor for my little essays, damn shame I can't honestly include it in a lineage (though Bloom, I suppose, might give me, or give someone else, such as himself, license to include it, even though I knew nothing of it as I wrote). A reader may read anything he wants in and around any text he encounters, the author being conveniently dead no one other than the reader is left to assume responsibility for the production of meaning (not to mention the production of fictitious lineages and contexts). Last night I

was reading in Bataille's *Visions of Excess*. This is a book I've dipped into now and then during the past five or six years, finding little until last night that was of much interest to me. Last night, however, there was resonance on every page. That gold, water, the equator or crime can each be put forward as the principle of things, and that a car, a clock, or a sewing machine could equally be accepted as the generative principle, from "The Solar Anus", might be taken together as a central tenet of my recent essays. How unfortunate that I didn't read Bataille before I wrote them. I told Ken a week or so ago that I was pondering a sort of fractal quality of thinking, whereby one might think everything one knows starting from anywhere in one's experience. Bataille could have been useful in the formulation of such a proposition. "Rotten Sun" came as another example of a writing both unknown to me and clearly informing my recent practice. Context and lineage are subtle, insidious, lurking around every turned corner or page (watch your step). When I came to "The Sacred Conspiracy" I finally encountered the source for all my recent musings. What we are starting is a war. It is too late to be reasonable and educated. I should have considered Masson's sketch before I suggested we all give up, and chances are I would have had I known of it. All the same, here it is, somewhat belatedly looming as a source for my recent choosing. When Barthes wrote that there is no such thing as influence, only currency, I wonder did he intend to include a currency become consciously such only much after its inclusion in a writing?

6.02.01

Corny Dumb Ignorant and Silly

David Hammons: There's a process to get to brilliancy: you do all the corny things, and you might have to go through five hundred ideas. Any corny thought that comes into your head, do a sketch of it. You're constantly emptying the brain of the ignorant and the dumb and the silly things and there's nothing left but the brilliant ideas. The brilliant ideas are hatched through this process. Pretty soon you get ideas that no one else could have thought of because you don't think of them, you went through this process to get them. These thoughts are the ones that are used, the last of the hundred or five hundred, however many it takes. Those last thoughts are the ones that are used to make the image and the rest of them are thrown away. Hopefully you ride on that last good thought and you start thinking like that and you don't have to go through all these silly

things.

Michael Palmer: I want to see the work, not just what somebody has decided to publish.

I am eventually going to take a stand from which I can productively agree with both of the preceding statements. The only problem I have with the position Hammons takes is that he thinks some of the work should be thrown away. I think all the corny dumb ignorant and silly things should be exhibited and/or published. And I think, in a sense, this is what Palmer is getting at. I want the whole experience, and I'll decide, thank you very much, what, if anything, is corny dumb ignorant or silly. Chances are I won't bother using any of those words to designate any part of anything. Or, better than that, maybe I'll find a way to include the corny dumb ignorant and silly in my criteria for critical evaluation. I have a book edited by Frank Lentricchia, *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. It's a very useful book, and I dislike it quite a bit, in fact I enjoyed reading it immensely when I first encountered it. If, starting with Lentricchia's book and working backwards to Hammons' statement, I attempted to revise, or skew, or detourn the cherished jargon of the day, I might begin with an arbitrary substitution procedure by which four of the critical terms were replaced by corny dumb ignorant and silly. After much deliberation, I might settle upon the easiest method of substitution available to me: I might take the first letters of Hammons' four terms, c, d, i, and s, and find critical terms for literary study which begin with the same letters. Using this method I would have a choice of canon class or culture to be replaced by corny. I would replace culture with corny, simply because culture is a more inclusive term than either class or canon (in fact, as I think about it, culture significantly includes both class and canon, doesn't it?) From here I move on to dumb. My choices for replacement are discourse, determinacy/indeterminacy, diversity and desire. I will replace desire with dumb, simply because I want to. Moving on, my choices for replacement by ignorant are interpretation, intention, indeterminacy/determinacy, imperialism/nationalism, and ideology. Using the same criteria I used for the replacement of culture with corny, I will replace ideology with ignorant. I come now to the final new critical term, silly. My only choice for replacement by silly is structure, so by default structure becomes silly in this revisioning of the critical terms. I can now begin to say some provocative and engaging things about my work and, presumptuously, about the work of others as well. The term "corny" has not always been used in literary studies, and indeed the very concept denoted by the term is fairly recent. Corny, taken in its

wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Although Michel Foucault has argued that dumb has become within modern times a preoccupation of discourse, it is not always clear what a discourse on dumb might be. The notion of an essay on dumb is by definition beset by the very problem it seeks to explain. "Ignorant" is a term that embodies all the problems associated with the cultural complexity of language: it has a rich history, during which it has taken on various, sometimes contradictory meanings. The term "silly" replaces the venerable term "form" in many modern theories. Silliness man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it.

6.06.01

### Vertical rhythmic disjunction

Meaning is everywhere in everything all the time. This is perhaps the primary problem of being in the world. The endeavor against that fact is therefore perhaps primary among our many impossible tasks. If anywhere in anything at any time we are able to construct a context wherein meaning is neither paramount nor incessant, we will have opened a territory which leads exactly out of ourselves. As writers, we must look for this kind of opening in the minutiae of writing. Any detail found anywhere, no matter how rare, oblique, or quirky, no matter how clear the subjectivity of its discernment, must be attended to as if it is enormous and all but ineffable. We have seen the infinitely small open onto the infinitely large, and have come to suspect that this is a part of the pattern in which we reside. The cosmos lives in its little patterned quirks. There is a vertical rhythm in traditional lyric poetry that is as clear and as constructed as is the horizontal rhythm. As the syllable is the unit of composition for the horizontal rhythm, so the line is the unit of composition for the vertical rhythm. Vertical rhythm in traditional lyric poetry tends to be very regular, very conservative, very consistent in its development of a recognizable pattern. In much recent practice, while the conventions of the horizontal rhythms have been largely retained, those of the vertical rhythms have been radically disrupted. Disjunct vertical rhythms have become standard practice. The recognizability of the horizontal rhythms allow for the retention of a reading strategy that is predicated upon the premise that all poetry, indeed all text, is content-laden. That content has in recent years been increasingly extracted from

structure and/or context has not diverted normative reading strategies from their inclination towards locating content in the substrata or on the peripheries of the poem. The predictability of horizontal rhythmic patterns produces a mildly trance-like state wherein the reader is receptive to inherited strategies of reading which have been designed for the production of meaning within a content-laden context. Disruption of the horizontal rhythms merely makes the game of producing meaning seem fresh, a new challenge, but not a new kind of challenge. Horizontal rhythmic disjunction requires a fine-tuning of conventional reading strategies; it does not demand radically new reading strategies. We need a poetical context, a territory of poetry, in which radically different reading strategies are absolutely required. Vertical rhythmic disjunction offers the rudiments of such a context. Radical rhythmic disjunction along the vertical axis of a poem which appears in its shape on the page as a traditional lyric poem provides an opportunity if not an injunction for the development of a reading strategy which is not predicated upon the production of meaning within a content-laden context. This is a beginning. Other textual contexts will extend the potentialities opened here.

6.06.01

## Writing

It is perhaps very unfortunate for the processes themselves as well as for all those involved in them no matter in which capacity that writing and reading are so extremely dissimilar as activities and experiences as to be almost unrelated. I am not thinking here, or at least not yet, of differences in effect of these dissimilar experiences; I am thinking of the decisions and behaviors which occupy one's time while one is involved either in writing or in reading. Typing on a keyboard bears no resemblance whatsoever as an activity to reading what appears on a screen. Manipulating a pen has no relation as an activity to reading from a page, whether the page be loose or bound. These distinctions would seem to be too obvious to require mention, but their obviousness perhaps allows us to comfortably overlook them. Increasingly of late I want to think about what I am doing as I write. A month or so ago John Crouse sent me a piece of paper on which his six year old daughter had typed a few strings of letters. I sat down at my desk with the paper beside my keyboard and traced the path she had followed in producing these letter strings. The experience available there was as much as I currently require as a reader of any text.

I could see the decisions that had been made during the production of these letter strings. And I could retrace the physical activities which were involved in the actual production of the writing. I couldn't of course recreate the pauses, the disruptions and distractions that occurred during the writing, and I couldn't imagine or intuit or deduce the thoughts and intentions that accompanied the process of producing the writing. The actual time of the writing, the during of the writing, was entirely unavailable to me, as it is whenever I read any text. Writing as an activity allows us entrance into an area that is almost terrifyingly subjective. Reading allows us ultimately access to the absolute silence at the center of that area. When I think of writing I think primarily of poetry, and the poetry which primarily interests me is exploratory or experimental. The writing I want to think about is the writing that occurs at the extremities of writing. Writing is produced through a series of subjectively determined choices. Obviously no one writes in a vacuum, no one is entirely immune to inheritance and influence, no one writes entirely outside all contexts or free of every lineage. We have buried originality in the empty coffin of the dead author, and good riddance to both of them, but we won't so easily rid ourselves of the uniqueness of every act. The historicity of the act of writing, if scrutinized rigorously in the minute details of the actual time spent writing, vanishes into the ahistorical site of subjective choice. Perhaps I am with all of this troubling myself over an insignificant problem of scale. If we only attend to the larger patterns of the experience of writing, we will find the time spent writing bound by the historical and the psychological. If we are willing to attempt a scrutiny of the actual choices being made by any individual engaged at any time in any kind of writing, we will arrive in time at an absence and a void. That is, we will arrive in time at an absence and a void unless we are ourselves involved in the act of writing. I would like to produce a writing that made available to a reading at least the approximation of the possibilities evident in the letter strings written by Kailey Crouse. I doubt that I can do it, but I am certain that the process of the attempt will provide a uniquely resonant experience during the time spent writing. I suspect that for better or worse the kind of writing I am considering must be one which seeks rather than the alteration of the experience of reading the substitution of the experience of writing for that of reading. And I am not suggesting that the reader engaged in the collaborative endeavor of constructing meaning therein experiences the experience of writing. I am suggesting that the reader read enough to realize that he or she must write.

## The Stuff of Trivial Anecdotes

Things don't change; things are replaced, incessantly, by nearly exact replicas. Steven Wright nearly explained this to us several years ago in one of his jokes. Discontinuities and gaps are clues. We like to think we're following something, our lives, but we are tracking the traces of ghosts. Moving forward, we like to think, leaving a trail behind us, we act as if it is a given that all this adds up to something, evidence of our presence if nothing else. Identity is even less still than we continue to think it is. We should probably begin to think less in terms of prisons and more in terms of lies. Language doesn't feel like a prison, it feels inaccurate, inadequate, it feels like something designed, structured, precisely as a delivery system for lies. In a sense, in two senses, the last thing we can say about any instance of language is that it is wrong. Exactly right, for what it is, as if it has a will of its own, which intends to be wrong. It is as if language has been designed by us to prevent us from knowing certain things about ourselves, about being in the world. Time only exists as a quality of being in the world if we agree at least tacitly to omit from consideration many of the troublesome details of temporal experience. Two people eat dinner together. The clock records the passage of an hour. For one of them it seems like fifteen minutes; for the other, two hours. Both of them know an hour has passed, though neither has had an experience of this. We can dismiss such experience as trivial stuff, the stuff of trivial anecdotes, as if our lives were somehow made more meaningful, more comprehensible, by our agreement to omit most of our experiences. There are traditions which posit time as a single moment. I awakened one morning several years ago alive in this moment. A terrifying, devastating experience; the whole world was annihilated. Of course, there is no way of saying I spent any amount of time in this experience. I don't even know what to call it: a moment outside of time. We know better than this. In a moment I could read the red numbers on the clock beside the bed. I watched them as they changed. A few weeks ago I received an envelope of collages from Malok. One is on a small hexagonal scrap of paper. There's a vaguely anthropomorphic insect-like figure at the right, seemingly staring into a vortex. Inside the vortex there is a glyph that is reminiscent of musical notation, another that may be a corroded 's', another that might be an apostrophe. The vague silhouette of a female form floats at the lower right edge. At the lower left a form that could be a partially eaten apple, a bomb, some mutant brachiopod, or none of the above, seems to be rising

towards the vortex. At the bottom Malok has written, as a caption or a title, "God's Memory". Another collage, this one full-page, is entitled "The Fifty Incantations Of The Dissolving Earth". It begins with 1. Arise, the Genesis of the Light and the Dark and ends with 50. THERE IS NOTHING. Number 15: Complicated Insects Arisen! Number 21: God watches a portion of the Disappearance. Number 31: all time is one Moment. Number 32: existence is in All of Time. Most of the time most of us don't want to know that some among us have seen through all the lies, have broken out of prison. Very little that is cherished by the culture remains once all the little lies have been exposed as such. Most of us, most of the time, prefer the comforts of our collectively cherished lies to the kinds of experience evidenced in the little apocalypses of affirmation evinced by Malok. Number 8: Radiant Blobs connected by pain. Number 30: Praise the Wonderful Nightmare. Number 48: Be warned!

6.14.01

### A Few Whimsical Snapshots

After the rain, small puddles of colored water appear like aquatic life-forms scattered across the parking lot. There has been some light construction lately, the pavement is pocked with ravines and craters, so each puddle settles in a singular shape and acquires its local color. A large ditch stretches from the store across the lot towards the railroad tracks. Three feet deep near the door, it's only an inch where it crosses the path of the cars. The storm has passed, but the sky remains overcast, a greyish dim yellow light falls flat on the textured surfaces. If I could isolate this corner of the parking lot, set it aside and blow it up like it was the lower left corner of some master's canvas, it's eminent aspect would be an eerie ugliness. One puddle is shaped like a squashed amoeba, its surface a dull dirty orange, opaque, almost sickly. Another has taken the shape of the vesica piscis, the stylized signature of the Shela-na-gig, imprint left by the Teeth Mother as she squatted against the pavement. Oil from a leaking engine, dripped onto the lot and washed into this pool, forms a dingy spectrum on either side of a protuberance hidden near the imprint's center. The colors are dull and flat, dimmed and blurred by the greyish light.

I have a strong urge, strange for me, to photograph all this. In my mind I set up shots: this puddle from this angle, standing upright, eight to ten feet away; then again, from another angle, say ninety degrees to my right,

squatting, from about six feet; then the other puddle, standing directly over it, shooting straight down; and again, back about four or five feet, lying down, camera on the ground, shooting across its surface. These options occupy a fraction of a moment's thought. My next thought is that anyone who sees me will think I'm a fool and worse. I'm immediately liberated from this consideration by the realization that it is quite likely always the case, and I've known for years that nothing could matter less. Now I am left to consider why I would want to bother, why take the time and trouble to photograph this utterly banal scene. The question seems to be its own answer, so the moment's whimsy passes. Fortunately for me (and quite possibly for you as well), I don't have my camera with me anyway, and so couldn't act on this whim even if I chose to.

I don't particularly like cameras, specifically I don't like being around people who carry cameras, don't like doing things or going places with people who carry cameras. In the spring of 78, I read Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. I was staying at Harris' house in Greensboro, laying around doing lots of very little, drinking beer, writing weak imitations of Berryman and Dugan, Merwin and Simic, listening to Waylon and Willie, Tom Waits and Randy Newman, lots of late 60s jazz and delta blues, Miles and Trane, Mance Lipscomb, Mississippi John Hurt, waiting to get together with my friends from Virginia and head out across the country.

I don't remember much about Sontag's book (I bought a copy of it recently at the library book sale, but I don't even think I've opened it — it's on the shelf beside my desk, but I don't even think I'll open it now). I remember Al Moreland had a camera with him on the trip. We spent a couple of leisurely weeks weaving across the country from Washington, DC to Eureka, CA by way of the Painted Desert and Big Sur. I don't even remember seeing the camera until we reached Big Sur. I do remember quite clearly that it sickened me when it came out in the car as we rode along the coastal highway.

One summer in the late 60s my family was vacationing on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. One day we were all standing in a little sandy field near our tent, looking out over the sound at the sunset. Nearby, another family was engaged in a similar activity, except the man had set up his camera on a tripod. We could hear him talking. He said he wanted to "capture it on film". I must have been about ten years old. It was probably the word "capture" that caught my attention. There seemed to be something entirely wrong about the whole idea.

In the last six months I've taken maybe eight or ten photographs of myself. If I don't count the sessions in the mid-eighties with John Van Balen, I've probably taken as many photographs of myself this year as

were taken of me during the previous twenty-five years. I guess I'm beginning to feel something slipping away. An image of my self, I suppose, and it seems I would like to capture it, absurd as that seems and sounds to me, I suppose I would like to capture it for others. As for myself, I'd like to let it go.

The closer I get to honestly thinking I would like to let all of it go, the more clearly I behave as if I can't bear to let any of it slip away.

6.17.01

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